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# Cheap Shot

President Reagan has implied that last week's bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and, by extension, earlier terrorist attacks on American facilities in Lebanon, might have been prevented had it not been for the cuts made by the Carter Administration in the ranks of the CIA. "We're feeling the effects today of the near destruction of our intelligence capability in recent years," he said during a campaign appearance. Reagan, however, offered no evidence to support this attempt to draw a direct link between what happened years ago and what happened just the other day. The probability is that no such evidence could in fact be produced.

It's true that about 600 agents were cut from the CIA's clandestine operations in the 1970s, along with several hundred other employees. It's also the case that some intelligence efforts apparently suffered in consequence, particularly in Third World countries. But as CIA Director William J. Casey has informed the Senate Intelligence Committee, the CIA began to undergo a rebuildup in 1979, under the Carter Administration. Given the Reagan Administration's emphasis from the day it took office on augmenting intelligence efforts, the CIA has presumably long since been at least restored to its previous capabilities.

What does all this have to do with the Beirut embassy attacks and the bombing of the Marine base at Beirut airport? Very little, if anything. By some accounts the biggest blows to U.S. intelligence in Lebanon came with the 1982 expulsion from Beirut of the Palestine Liberation Organization, some of whose members were on the CIA payroll, and with the killing of a number of the CIA's top Middle East experts in the embassy explosion of April, 1983. Even if none of this had happened, anti-American terrorism in Lebanon might still have occurred.

It is no secret that intelligence agencies, even the most experienced, cannot hope to learn everything or penetrate each tightly knit terrorist group. Reagan has acknowledged in the embassy bombings that foolproof security against suicidal fanatics is impossible to guarantee, no matter what physical safeguards are taken. Neither, it might be added, can such security be assured no matter how great are the resources devoted to intelligence. The President's effort to blame the Carter Administration for the terrorism in Lebanon that has come during his tenure was a cheap shot. In both the literal and the political sense, Reagan should have known better than to say what he did.